

Where's The COMSEC? Vietnam 1965 November 8

President Johnson's desire to increase the operations tempo against Communist-backed forces in Vietnam in 1965 is demonstrated by his approval of the massive bombing campaign known as Rolling Thunder, and his increase in the number of U.S. military personnel in country from 75,000 to 125,000.



Aftermath of the battle in the Ia Drang Valley

According to a briefing to NSA Communications Security (COMSEC) personnel by Major Reichard of the Army Security Agency (ASA), the situation in Vietnam in 1965 was not good. The major summarized a comprehensive ASA study of 1st Cavalry

Division COMSEC operations between October 1 and December 20, 1965, and focused primarily on communications associated with Operation Silver Bayonet in the Chu Phong Massif and the Ia Drang Valley. Part of the battle represents the first large-scale, direct encounter of the war between the U.S. and North Vietnamese Armies and the first operational use of new U.S. air cavalry tactics.

Divided into three parts, the study assessed the COMSEC posture at the time the 1st Cavalry Division first arrived in country, during its early skirmishes, and finally during Operation Silver Bayonet. It focused on a total of 820K plus transmissions of all types, with 70% being voice radio transmissions.

Specifically referencing the 1st Cavalry Division operations in late November 1965, the following observations were made in the third part of the study:

1. Was COMSEC planning conducted prior to the operation? "No, they did not, nor is it currently a policy of the 1st Cavalry Division to incorporate unique COMSEC planning in conjunction with combat operations."
2. What COMSEC support did ASA provide during the operation? "...only a limited degree due to the non-availability of aircraft transportation necessary for the COMSEC position movement to the forward area until 23 November."
3. What kinds of communications and crypto equipment were used? "All available crypto equipment was used and none were lost." Among the radio equipment listed; AN/VRC-47, AN/PRC-25 and AN/MRC-95. KW-7's were used to secure these communications.
4. What paper and pencil crypto and authentication systems were used during this operation? "It is obvious they did not make full use of these codes, even though some were unauthorized, and insecure. Only the KW-7 was used to full advantage with respect to cryptosecurity."
5. What COMSEC improvement actions have been taken by the 1st Cavalry Division as a result of this operation? "Operators and commanders appear to be more aware of the need for COMSEC." It was also pointed out that, "Air mobile units...have more to lose through their telecommunications than normal combat organizations because the massive logistics involved in the air mobile concept generates transmissions which are voluminous and give good reflection of friendly intentions. "

The study concluded the status of U.S. Army COMSEC in Vietnam in 1965 was, "PP-Pityfully [*sic*] Poor!" It did acknowledge that after a few skirmishes personnel, described as generally unaware of the dangers of COMSEC insecurities before the firefights, showed some COMSEC improvement as authentication became more common, and personnel appeared to be increasingly aware of the need for good COMSEC. As so often is the case, experience is a hard teacher, but over time those who pay close attention, benefit from the lessons it provides.

Photo caption: Combat troops at Ia Drang Valley, Vietnam, November 1965.

Photo credit: U.S. Army

508 CAPTION: two groups of soldiers are helping the walking wounded get to a helicopter in the rear of the photo; they are passing through a recent battlefield where the corpses of the enemy fallen and lost equipment are laying.